

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON - A delegation of Commissioners from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) visited Uzbekistan October 16-23, as part of the Commission's annual deliberative process. As required by Congress in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), each year the Commission reviews the status of freedom of religion or belief worldwide and makes recommendations to the Secretary of State as to which countries should be designated "countries of particular concern," or CPCs, for their "systematic, ongoing, and egregious abuses" of religious freedom. Uzbekistan has been on the Commission's Watch List since 2002.

In Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, delegation members held an intensive series of discussions with senior officials of the Foreign, Internal, and Justice Ministries, the Presidential Administration, the Committee on Religious Affairs, and the Parliamentary Ombudsmen's office. The delegation also met with representatives of the major religious communities in Uzbekistan, Uzbek human rights activists and public defenders, victims of repression and their families, representatives of western non-governmental organizations that are active in Uzbekistan, and U.S. Embassy officials. The Commission also visited the cities of Samarkand, Ferghana City, Margilon, and Andijan, where the delegation met with regional officials, human rights activists, and local religious leaders.

A staff delegation visited Baku, Azerbaijan October 24-28. Delegation members met with Azeri government officials, leaders of the official Muslim establishment as well as independent Muslim groups, representatives of minority religious communities, representatives of Azeri human rights groups and western human rights organizations, and U.S. Embassy officials.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

- Preeta D. Bansal ,
- Felice D. Gaer ,